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# Tackling the problem of childhood obesity

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Obesity, one of the most prevalent health issues in today's contemporary world, can be defined as an extreme accumulation of body fat (Lohman, 1987), while 'Childhood Obesity' is a serious medical condition that affects children and adolescents (as per definition given by the Mayo Clinic). It occurs when a child is well above the normal weight for his or her age and height. The prevalence of childhood obesity across the world has increased significantly during the past three to four decades. In the USA alone, childhood obesity has more than doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents in the past 30 years. Even in the developing countries, obesity is now becoming a widely common and worrying phenomenon, especially in the urban areas.

Today, childhood obesity has become a worldwide concern because of its strong proven association with a variety of serious health problems and issues, that were once considered to be only limited to adults. Some of these diseases are diabetes, high blood pressure, cholesterol, and various risk factors associated with cardiovascular diseases (Must & Strauss, 1999). In

additional to physical complications and diseases, childhood obesity also leads to poor mental health and self-esteem, psychosocial issues, and depression.

Bangladesh, being a developing nation, still sees rampant 'childhood under-nutrition', especially amongst lower income classes. However, over the past few decades, there has also been a steep rise in childhood obesity and overweight complications, leading to a serious double burden of malnutrition. Childhood obesity is prevalent disproportionately among urban affluent families in Bangladesh; with higher incomes leading to greater purchasing power enabling children of these families to indulge in junk and calorie dense foods and live relaxed lifestyles, making them highly vulnerable to obesity and its associated risks and dangers. The ever dwindling playgrounds in urban areas, further exacerbates the problem. A survey conducted by the Centre for Control of Chronic Diseases of the ICDDR,B with support from the National Nutrition Services of Institute of Public Health Nutrition says ten out of every 100 children, aged 5-18 living in Bangladesh's urban areas are overweight, while 4% are obese.

The emerging epidemic of childhood obesity in Bangladesh can be attributed to a confluence of multiple factors such as poor dietary choices (fast foods and high calorie beverages), inactive lifestyle habits, reduced physical activities due to lack of playgrounds in schools and housing societies, widespread use of electronic gadgets and sitting immobile for hours at a stretch in front of the television. Medical research has also proved that there are genetic diseases, parental obesity history, and hormonal disorders that can make a child prone to obesity.

World Health Organization (WHO) has declared childhood obesity as one of the most serious public health challenges of 21st century as this problem is seriously affecting both the developed and developing countries. It is estimated that there will be 60 million cases of childhood obesity globally by 2020. In the backdrop of such a bleak scenario, what can be done to address this situation before it goes completely out of control?

As adults, parents and citizens, it is not only our responsibility, but also an obligation for all of us to ensure that our children, the future generations, have a healthier and longer life than us. In order to do so, we need to take necessary steps and do everything within our capacity to reverse this alarming trend of childhood obesity in Bangladesh.

One thing that we all need to remember is that childhood obesity is 'not' an incurable disease. In fact, the solutions to combat this dangerous situation and reverse the epidemic, are pretty simple and well known to all of us – a balanced, healthy diet; regular physical activity; and educating our youth, children and their parents on obesity, its consequences and health effects, and its management. In terms of eating healthy, parents, guardians as well as children need to be informed and educated regarding what constitutes healthy eating and how it should be incorporated in to daily life. While we can't change the overwhelming space constraints of Dhaka city, which hardly has any playgrounds for children, this cannot be an excuse for an inactive, lazy and unhealthy way of life – either for children or for adults. In my opinion, we can definitely bring about a change in the mindsets of the people as to how to adjust and cope with the changing realities of urban life. Through national campaigns and strategies on healthy living,

education and knowledge can be imparted to make parents, guardians, children and youth aware of healthy eating habits, and how to incorporate an active lifestyle. School based public health intervention programmes aiming to increase awareness and reduce the risk factors for overweight and obesity among children are also crucial to combat this problem. Physical education and fitness programs can be made a compulsory part of the school's educational curriculum, thereby incorporating physical activities in indoor settings as opportunities for outdoor engagement are limited.

As parents and guardians, it is our responsibility and well within our capacity to make the right choices for our children, so as to guide and equip them towards a lifetime of good health – by helping them make smart food choices, and understand and implement a regular routine of exercise / physical activities in their daily lives. Instead of simply preaching about a healthy and active lifestyle, the onus is on us to act as role models for our children, by incorporating these very principles of clean and healthy eating and active lifestyle in our own lives – as 'children do, as they see'. Cutting down on TV and time spent on gadgets, reducing consumption of junk foods, incorporating daily walks or some form of sport or activity in the daily routine – are all actions that need to start at home. Sports should be incorporated across all schools, public and private, as an important aspect of overall student development. This can be done through enacting (stronger) and implementing legislations within the country's educational policy framework. Moreover, since children spend a lot of their time in school, offering healthy school lunch options is another way to introduce the concept of healthy choices.

There may be no single approach to reducing obesity, but every little bit can help against such a widespread, multifaceted public health problem.

I know it's easier said than done to implement all the above mentioned points and in no way am I suggesting that these goals will be easy to achieve. There will undoubtedly be barriers, within families, schools and communities, to achieving them. Single, isolated actions will not be able to tackle the rising problem of childhood obesity effectively. What is needed is a concerted, committed, community-wide effort for us to safeguard the health of our children. And this will require significant investment – but I strongly believe that you all will agree, when it comes to our future generations, our children, our legacy – no investment can ever be too much.

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